

OPENING THE SEALED RECORD:
FACTORS AFFECTING THE ATTITUDES OF ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Joan Ferry DiGiulio, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of Social Work
Youngstown State University
Youngstown, Ohio

Overview

There are approximately 2.25 million Americans who have been adopted by nonrelatives and thus are affected by state laws controlling access to information concerning their births (Burke, 1975). Information about the identity and genealogy of the adoptee may be found in three sources: the files of the agency or private party which received the child from the biological parent or parents; the records of the court concerning preliminary and final adoption approval; and the official local or state repository for birth certificates. Almost all states have laws which place court records and birth certificates under seal and restrict access to anyone without an appropriate court order. While only a few state statutes restrict access to agency records, many agencies forbid divulging agency record information, especially identifying information, on the basis of prohibition by law (Klibanoff, 1977; Bell, 1978).

Attempts to amend state statutes that would result in opening sealed records to adult adoptees began in the mid-1970's and continues unabated in legislative bodies across the country. Currently, Alabama, Alaska, Kansas, and Pennsylvania permit an adult adoptee to have access to his or her birth certificate without a court order. Idaho and South Dakota allow the adult adoptee access to court records on demand. The legislatures of Connecticut, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, and Wisconsin permit adult adoptees to obtain identifying information about their birth families through an intermediary system. The states of California, Colorado, Florida, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Nevada, New York, Oregon and Texas allow the adult adoptee access to identifying information through a registry system (Harrington, 1979, 1981, 1984; Askin, 1982). While most states will allow access to court records on a petition to the courts for "good cause", what constitutes "good cause", has not been clearly defined, resulting in discrepancy from one jurisdiction to another. Matters of health and possible genetic defects have been known to constitute "good cause", but the need to know of one's roots and the resolution of identity problems have not (Kadushin, 1980).

Many sealed records' bills that have been introduced have not passed. However, a historical perspective reveals that they are being reintroduced and intense emotional lobbying by vested interest groups is occurring. Societal changes coupled with lobbying efforts have led to a growing feeling that the rigid and unbending application of sealed records legislation has produced unintended and tragic consequences. In this changing atmosphere, relaxation of sealed record legislation is a distinct possibility (Harrington, 1979). The Child Welfare League of America in its' revised edition of Standards for Adoption Service (1978) warns that because of possible or future legal changes, agencies can no longer make firm assurances of confidentiality concerning the identity of natural and adoptive parents.

Statement of Problem

There is a paucity of research in the area of opening sealed records. While the attitudes and reactions of adoptees and biological parents have dominated the sealed record literature, the positions taken by adoptive parents have received much less attention. By ignoring this group, a salient and powerful part of the adoption triad is neglected and an opportunity for improving ongoing social services is lost.

Before devising a service delivery system that addresses the needs of the adoptive family in relation to changing legislation, it is imperative to ascertain the ingredients that contribute to the variance in adoptive parents' attitudes concerning open records. The researcher first became aware of the diversity of attitudes while conducting family life education workshops designed to help adoptive parents cope with the search issue (DiGiulio, 1979). A review of adoption literature, discussions with adoption professionals and observation of workshop participants point to several factors that appear to influence the range of adoptive parent's attitudes toward open records. These factors consist of the ability to differentiate between adoptive and biological parenthood, the capacity to accept the adopted child as a separate, autonomous entity and the degree of the adoptive parent's self acceptance. Two additional factors, namely the adoptive parent's sex and education also seem to influence open record attitudes. This study explores the significance of these variables on the range of adoptive parent attitudes toward opening sealed records.

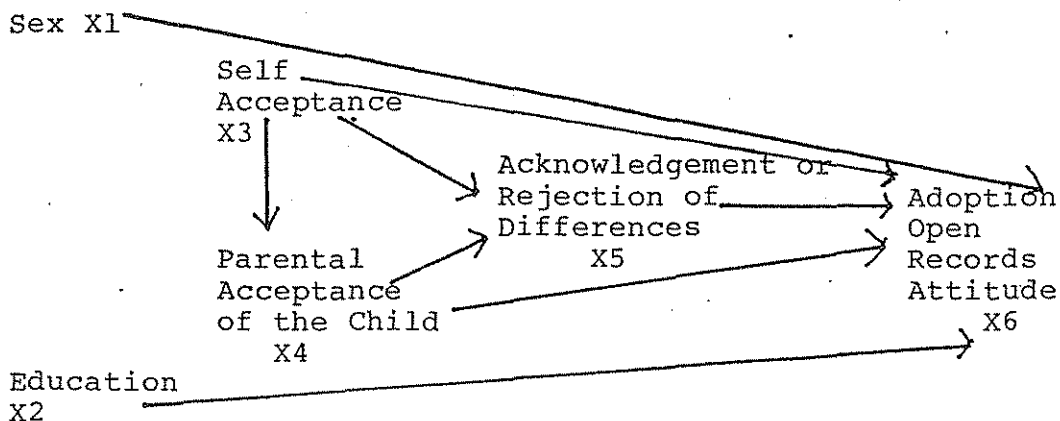
Theoretical Framework

A composite of theoretical underpinnings for the independent variables was developed to provide a basis for the proposed causal process at work in this area. As Reynolds' (1979) maintains, scientific knowledge is appropriately advanced by means of a set of interrelated causal processes, rather than awaiting one overall grand theory which explains everything. Hence, role theory was used both as a way of explaining the difference in open record attitudes between male and female adoptive parents and also as a base for understanding adoptive parents who accept or reject differences between adoptive and biological parenthood. Next, ideational value theory was used to justify the variable of education. Finally, theoretical constructs from the psychology of the self were reviewed in relation to self acceptance and acceptance of the adopted child.

Conceptual Model

Drawing together the concepts discussed above, a conceptual model of the influence of several characteristics of adoptive parents upon their attitudes regarding open records was proposed. The independent population variables of sex and education were thought to contribute to the dependent variable, adoption open records attitude; the variables of self acceptance and parental acceptance of the child were considered to contribute to the variable of acknowledgement of or rejection of the differences in adoptive parenthood; and all the variables in the study: sex, education, self acceptance, parental acceptance of the child, and acknowledgement of or rejection of the differences in adoptive parenthood were reasoned to contribute to the dependent variable, adoption open records attitude. The linkages are set forth in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1: CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF THE INFLUENCES OF PARENTS' CHARACTERISTICS ON THEIR ATTITUDES TOWARD OPEN RECORDS



Statement of Hypotheses

From this conceptual framework, the formal research hypotheses were specified. The specific predictions were that observations would conform to the following patterns:

1. Female adoptive parents are more likely to have higher adoption open records attitude scores than male adoptive parents. (X6=X1)
2. The lower the years of education of adoptive parents, the higher the adoption open records attitude scores. (X6=X2)
3. The higher the self acceptance scores of adoptive parents, the higher the adoption open records attitude scores. (X6=X3)
4. The higher the parental acceptance of the child scores of adoptive parents, the higher the adoption open records attitude scores. (X6=X4)
5. The higher the acknowledgement of differences scores of adoptive parents, the higher the adoption open records attitude scores. (X6=X5)
6. The higher the self acceptance scores of adoptive parents, the higher the acknowledgement of differences scores. (X5=X3)
7. The higher the parental acceptance of the child scores of adoptive parents, the higher the acknowledgement of differences scores. (X5=X4)
8. The higher the self acceptance scores of adoptive parents, the higher the parental acceptance of child scores. (X4=X3)
9. The highest scores on attitudes regarding open records will be found among those parents characterized by the combination of high scores on acknowledgement of differences, parental acceptance of the child, self acceptance, lower years of education, and females. (X6=X5, X4, X3, X2, X1)

Methodology

A cross sectional survey design was used to examine the relationship between the dependent variable, adoption open records attitude, and the independent variables: sex, education, self acceptance, parental acceptance of the child, and acknowledgement or rejection of differences.

Definition and Operationalization of Variables

The variables identified in the hypotheses are defined and operationalized below.

Sex is defined as the gender of the adoptive parent respondent, distinguished respectively as male or female.

Education takes into account the formal schooling completed by the adoptive parent. This was accomplished by using an ordinal scale consisting of the following categories: less than elementary school graduation; elementary school graduate; high school graduate; junior college graduate; bachelor's degree; master's degree; and Ph.D. or professional degree.

Self acceptance is the tendency of the adoptive parent to perceive him or herself as a person of worth, accepting both one's faults and virtues (Rogers, 1950). The Phillips Self-Acceptance Scale (Phillips, 1951) was used to measure self acceptance.

Parental acceptance of the child was defined as the adoptive parent's ability to recognize the adopted child as a person with feelings who has a right and need to express those feelings; value the unique make-up of the adopted child; and recognize the adopted child's need to differentiate and separate from parents in order to become an autonomous individual. This variable was measured by the Parental Acceptance Scale (Porter, 1952).

Acknowledgement or rejection of differences is defined as the adoptive parent's coping mechanism to deal with the role of adoptive parent, by either admitting the differences which exist between biological and adoptive parenthood or denying any such differences between the two forms of parenthood, with the obvious exception of childbirth being involved in one instance and not the other. A shortened form of the Adoptive Parenthood Questionnaire (Carroll, 1968) was used to measure this variable.

Adoption open records attitude was defined as the adoptive parent's organized predisposition to think, feel, perceive and behave positively or negatively toward the opening of sealed adoption records. This variable was measured on the adoption Open Records Attitude Scale, a unidimensional scale, designed by the researcher and intended to locate the adoptive parent's attitude toward opening sealed records on a continuum ranging from positive to negative.

Sampling Plan

A stratified random sample without replacement was used in this study. The study sample of adoptive couples

was drawn from alphabetically ordered index cards of adoptive couples from three adoption agencies located in Northeast Ohio. The final total sample consisted of 80 adoptive couples whose adopted children were minors, who adopted children three years of age or younger, and excluded step-parent and relative adoptions.

Data Collection

Adoptive couples selected through random sampling received a letter informing them of their selection for the study, a statement of the study's purpose, assurance of confidentiality, information about the researcher phoning them to set up an appointment, and a statement giving them the agency's phone number they were to call if they did not wish to participate. The cover letter was sent on the letterhead stationary of the agency that handled the adoption and was signed by the agency executive.

After the adoptive couple received the letter and a few days beyond the call-in deadline for non-participation, the researcher phoned to schedule an appointment for an interview in the couple's home. Random sampling without replacement continued until the desired number of agreeable couples were located. Thirteen percent of the adoptive couples receiving letters did not participate for reasons of both parents or one of the parents refusing or difficulty in scheduling an agreeable appointment time due to employment commitments or children's activities. The researcher went to the couple's home at the time of the scheduled appointment. After a brief introduction, each adoptive parent was given an adoption survey form, consisting of the study's scales, to complete in the presence of the researcher thus avoiding the possibility of collaborating with the spouse or another party.

Findings

Description of the Population

The majority (53%) of adoptive parents in the study were high school graduates, while the second largest group (19%) completed the Bachelor's Degree, and the third largest group (12%) received a two year Associate's Degree.

The study's adoptive parents had adopted a total of 121 children. The majority (54%) had only adopted one child, 41 percent had adopted two children, and only 5 percent had adopted three children.

The mean age of adoptive parents was 41 years, their mean number of years married was 18 years, and the mean age of their adopted child fell into the latency age range. These findings indicate that the adoptive parents tended to be older and married for a substantial number of years before they received adopted children. This is in accordance with the literature on adoptive parenthood (Kadushin, 1980).

The majority (69%) of adoptive homes did not have biological children, while of those that did have biological children (31%), the majority (68%) had only one child. The mean age of biological children was older than that of adoptive children, pointing to the fact that most of the study's adoptive couples who had a biological child bore this child prior to adopting.

Bivariate Hypotheses

The bivariate relationships between the variables selected for analysis were examined in order to determine which hypotheses were substantively supported as the zero-order level. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated for the six variables in the model. The resulting correlation matrix is set forth in Table 1. The findings in this matrix for each bivariate hypothesis supported at the significance level are then discussed and additional findings are also mentioned.

TABLE 1

PEARSON'S CORRELATION COEFFICIENTS AMONG VARIABLES

	Sex	Education	AORS	ACREJD	PACS	SAS
Sex	1.0000					
Education	.0559	1.0000	1.0000			
AORS	.0552	.0059	.2691*	1.0000		
ACREJD	.2894*	-.0475	-.0549	.1958*	1.0000	
PAC	.2397*	-.1234	-.0866	-.2666*	.1443*	1.0000
SAS	-.0085	.0462				

*P < .05

Hypotheses

As predicted, the higher the acknowledgement of

differences scores of adoptive parents, the higher were the adoption open records attitude scores. However, the lower the self acceptance scores of adoptive parents, the higher were their acknowledgement of differences scores. This finding did not occur in the direction expected. One explanation might be that adoptive parents' self acceptance did not effect their acceptance either of the adoptive parent role or the adoptive parent-child relationship and thus did not directly influence the ability to acknowledge the differences between biological and adoptive parenthood.

As hypothesized, the higher the parental acceptance of the child scores of adoptive parents, the higher were their acknowledgement of differences scores. Likewise, the higher the self acceptance scores of adoptive parents, the higher were their parental acceptance of child scores.

Additional Findings

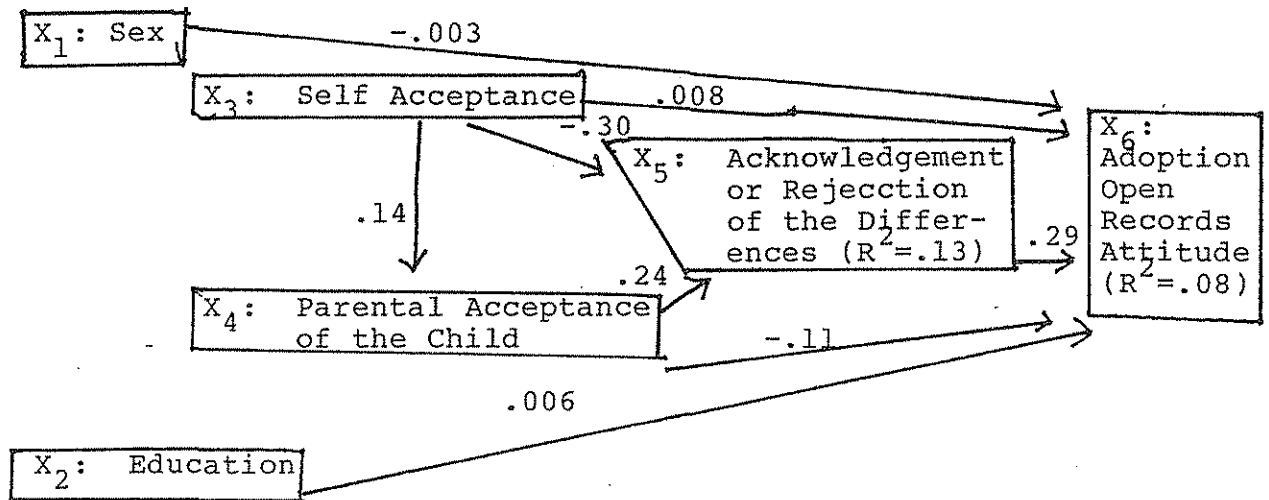
Female adoptive parents had higher acknowledgement of differences scores than male adoptive parents. Although this finding was not hypothesized, it would seem quite plausible and consistent with adoption literature that cites the adoptive father's concern with family lineage and the importance of leaving an heir for the continuation of the family blood line (Brenner, 1951; Kirk, 1964), which might then lead to the rejection of differences between adoptive and biological parenthood.

Female adoptive parents had higher parental acceptance of the child scores than male adoptive parents. Again this finding is not at all surprising when one considers the numerous studies that suggest mothers are viewed as more affectionate, nurturant, supportive, and encouraging and fathers are perceived as more restrictive and controlling (Fitzgerald, 1966; Armentrout and Burger, 1972).

Path Analysis

The relative influences of the five independent variables upon the dependent variable, adoption open records attitude, are clarified by the path analysis. The model as originally proposed in Figure 1 resulted in several path coefficients that were less than .10 and were considered to lack substantive meaningfulness. The original path model diagramming the causal influences is presented in Figure 2, each of the direct effects of prior on subsequent variables being reported adjacent to the arrow representing the link in the conceptual model.

FIGURE 2: CONCEPTUAL MODEL AND PATH COEFFICIENTS

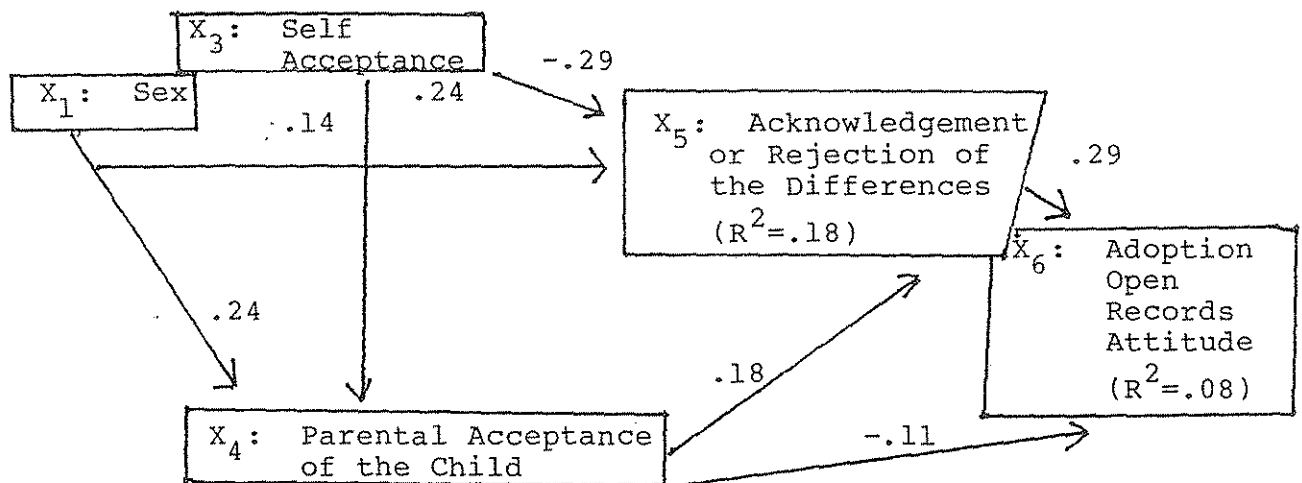


Since the originally proposed conceptual model had several variables with path coefficients lacking substantive empirical meaningfulness, it was necessary to refine the model and to attempt to determine which variables and paths did validly belong in the model and which did not. It was decided to delete those variables with path coefficients that were less than .10. An examination of the original model showed that the variables of Sex (X₁), Education (X₂) and Self Acceptance (X₃) were not primary direct factors explaining Adoption Open Records Attitude (X₆), each of these path coefficients being less than .10. The variables of Sex (X₁) and Education (X₂) were thus eliminated from the refined model. However, since Self Acceptance (X₃) had a negative direct influence on Acknowledgement or Rejection of the Differences (X₅), and a positive direct effect on Parental Acceptance of the Child (X₄), it was retained in the refined model with these two paths, but the path between Self Acceptance (X₃) and Adoption Open Records Attitude (X₆) was dropped.

Before finalizing the refined model, the bivariate relationships were examined with specific emphasis on

additional findings that were supported at the significance level. Two of these findings focused on female adoptive parents and both of these were supported by the theoretical underpinning of role theory. These explicit findings were: female adoptive parents had higher acknowledgement of differences scores than male adoptive parents; and female adoptive parents had higher parental acceptance of the child scores than male adoptive parents. Because of the significance of these findings coupled with the theory base rationale, the variable of Sex (X_1) was re-entered into the revised model with two new paths added, one from Sex (X_1) to Acknowledgement or Rejection of Differences (X_5) and a second path from Sex (X_1) to Parental Acceptance of the Child (X_4). The final refined model is presented in Figure 3. The direct effects of prior on subsequent variables are reported adjacent to the arrow representing that link in the refined model.

FIGURE 3: REFINED MODEL AND PATH COEFFICIENTS



It is important to note that both the original conceptual model and the revised model explained only a small percent of the variance in the variables, acknowledgement or rejection of the differences and adoption open records attitude. In the original conceptual model 13% of the variance in acknowledgement or rejection of the differences was explained by the combined effects of the independent variables, and 18% was explained in the revised model. While in both the original conceptual model and in the revised model only 8% of the variance in adoption open records attitude was explained by the combined effects of the independent variables.

Implications for Policy

The study findings show the importance of recognizing the differences between biological and adoptive parenthood. As was previously mentioned, those adoptive parents who viewed adoptive parenthood as different than biological parenthood were more receptive toward opening the sealed record. It is important to understand these differences and not to negate them by following a current trend which is attempting to ensure greater parity between adoptive and biological parenthood. Strides which have been made to equalize these two types of parenthood include granting maternity type benefits to adoptive mothers and allowing taxpayers to deduct the expenses involved in adoption (Kadushin, 1980). While these innovations are admirable and seek to remove potential discrimination, the distinct differences in these two types of parenthood cannot be discarded.

The results of the study suggest considerations that adoption agencies contemplate in the formulation of their selection policies for adoptive parents. Specifically, it is important that the agency accurately assess the ability of the adoptive applicant to be self accepting, accepting of the adopted child and able to recognize the differences between adoptive and biological parenthood. Possession of these traits will improve the quality of the adoptive parent-child relationship and ultimately bring about more receptivity to sealed record changes.

Implications for Practice

In the past many adoption agencies considered their services to be completed at the time of the final legal hearing, when the adoptive parents assumed permanent legal rights to their adopted child. As agencies have become more aware of the necessity for continuing services to parties of the adoption, their programs have reflected changes in this direction. This study reaffirms the need for providing services to adoptive families throughout their life cycle in order to help them cope with the phenomenon of adoption in general and more specifically the issue of opening sealed records. The study results can supply adoption agencies with additional information that can be utilized in staff training and development programs, as well as in the design and implementation of programs to parties of the adoption.

The significant study finding, that adoptive parents who were able to acknowledge differences between biological and adoptive parenthood were more receptive toward opening the sealed record, needs to be emphasized in the training of adoption professionals. If these adoption workers can recognize the distinct differences between these two types of parenthood, these variations can then be reflected in the services offered. At the time of the initial adoption application, potential adoptive parents could be educated as to the differences, and adoption procedures that tend to negate the difference, such as matching, could be discarded. Family life education programs for adoptive families could be planned that would reflect the dissimilarities at various stages in the family's and child's life cycle.

Since the study revealed that female adoptive parents were more able to acknowledge differences between adoptive and biological parenthood and were also more accepting of their adopted child, it would be imperative for the adoption agency to emphasize the necessity of the adoptive father's participation in their adoption education programs and services. This would then dictate that programs be offered at times and days when adoptive fathers, as well as mothers, would be available. Thus, more flexible hours, that would include evening and weekend programs, are indicated.

Because the study revealed that self accepting adoptive parents were more accepting of their adopted child, agency programs for adoptive parents might hope to increase the self accepting ability of the adoptive parent. This would be especially pertinent in the area where adoption occurs due to infertility, since infertility can lessen one's self acceptance and self esteem (Shapiro, 1982). By helping the infertile couple deal with their mourning and loss and eventually to reach self approval, the agency is also improving the quality of the parent-child relationship.

Finally, programs for adoptive parents should seek to strengthen the parental acceptance of the adopted child, as the study demonstrated that parents who possessed this trait were more able to acknowledge differences between adoptive and biological parenthood. The unique characteristics of the adopted child, such as their identity conflicts and loyalty issues need to be emphasized in an effort to bring about a realistic acceptance of the adopted child.

References

- Armentrout, James A., and Gary K. Burger. "Children's Reports of Parental Childrearing Behavior at Five Grade Levels." Developmental Psychology 7 (July 1972): 44-48.
- Askin, Jayne. Search: A Handbook for Adoptees and Birthparents. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1982.
- Bell, Cynthia J. "Accessibility to Adoption Records: Influences on Agency Policy." Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1978.
- Brenner, Ruth F. "A Follow-Up Study of Adoptive Families." Child Adoption Research Committee, (March 1951).
- Burke, Carolyn. "The Adult Adoptee's Constitutional Right to Know His Origins." Southern California Law Review 48 (June 1975): 1196-1220.
- Carroll, Jerome F. X. The Acceptance or Rejection of Differences Between Adoptive and Biological Parenthood by Adoptive Applicants as Related to Various Indices of Adjustment/Maladjustment. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1968.
- Child Welfare League of America. Standards for Adoption Service-Revised Edition. New York: Child Welfare League of America, 1978.
- DiGiulio, Joan Ferry. "The 'Search': Providing Continued Service for Adoptive Parents." Child Welfare 58 (July-August 1979): 460-465.
- Fitzgerald, Maureen P. "Sex Differences in the Perception of the Parental Role for Middle and Working Class Adolescents." Journal of Clinical Psychology 22 (January 1966): 15-16.
- Harrington, Joseph D. "Legislative Reform Moves Slowly." Public Welfare 37 (Summer 1979): 49-57.
- Harrington, Joseph D. "Legislative Update on Sealed Adoption Records." Public Welfare 39 (Spring 1981): 28-31.

- Harrington, Joseph D. "Adoption and the State Legislatures." Public Welfare 42 (Spring 1984): 34-46.
- Kadushin, Alfred. Child Welfare Services. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1980 (third edition).
- Kirk, H. David. Shared Fate: A Theory of Adoption and Mental Health. New York: The Free Press, 1964.
- Klibanoff, Elton. "Genealogical Information in Adoption: The Adoptee's Quest and the Law." Family Law Quarterly 11 (Summer 1977): 185-198.
- Phillips, E. Lakin. "Attitudes Toward Self and Others: A Brief Questionnaire Report." Journal of Consulting Psychology 15 (February 1951): 79-81.
- Porter, Blaine Milton. "The Relationship between Marital Adjustment and Parental Acceptance of Children." Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Cornell University, 1952.
- Reynolds, Paul Davidson. A Primer in Theory Construction. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1979.
- Rogers, Carl. "The Significance of the Self-Regarding Attitudes and Perceptions." In M. L. Reymert (Ed.), Feeling and Emotion: The Mooseheart Symposium. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1950.
- Shapiro, Constance H. "The Impact of Infertility on the Marital Relationship." Social Casework 63 (September 1982): 387-393.